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Alexandre Turgeon

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RESEARCH NOTE

“It’s just a tweet”: History, Memory, and Social Media

Alexandre Turgeon

On May 16, 2012, Quebecers were in the midst of what has since been called the “Maple Spring”—in French, *le printemps érable*—a clear, if not terribly subtle, reference to the “Arab Spring” of the previous year. As the biggest student strike in the history of Quebec and Canada showed no signs of slowing down, rumor had it that the government of Premier Jean Charest and his Quebec Liberal Party was about to go forward in the National Assembly with a special bill to restrain the right to engage in public protest.



Student strike rally, Montreal, 14 April 2012. Slogan: “The strike is student; the struggle is popular.” (Photo credit: Jean Gagnon, Wikimedia Commons).

At the time, I was a PhD candidate in History at Université Laval in Quebec City, and my student association had been on strike for almost four months. In those months, I was still working on my doctoral thesis on caricature (political cartoons) and the rhetorical origins of the “Great Darkness” (1936–1959),

a critical period in Quebec’s history, one that still embodies one of contemporary Quebec’s greatest and potent myths. While focused on it, I was also following closely the debates regarding the Maple Spring, both those at the National Assembly and those in the streets, through traditional and social media channels.

On Twitter, the main platform for the Maple Spring, there were three hashtags that emerged and captured my attention: #ggi (“*grève générale illimitée*” for unlimited general strike), #polqc (“*politique québécoise*” for Quebec politics) and #assnat (“*Assemblée nationale*” for National Assembly). Thanks to Tweetdeck, a Google Chrome application, I was able to follow, in real time, thousands, if not millions, of tweets produced day-in and day-out around those hashtags, without having to constantly refresh my browser. That is how, on May 16, 2012, I stumbled upon one exceptionally telling tweet. It was one from among the onslaught of tweets produced in the midst of the Maple Spring.

It was just a tweet; yet its author, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, was not an average online interlocutor. Nadeau-Dubois, was then the co-spokesperson of CLASSE (*Coalition large de l’Association pour une solidarité syndicale étudiante* [Coalition of the association for student union solidarity]), the leading student association during the strike, and who has since been elected as a member of parliament in the Quebec National Assembly and, in the past year, made co-spokesperson of the left-wing party Québec Solidaire. On May 16, 2012, as he was commenting on Charest’s proposed special bill, he tweeted this message: “De retour au temps de Duplessis?” – Are we back in the Duplessis era?”



Screenshot of Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois Tweet (@GNadeauDubois), “De retour au temps de Duplessis? #GGI #polQC #assnat”, May 16, 2012, 10:57.

What did he mean, exactly? Whereas a Quebec reader will certainly know what this is about, it might sound strange, at the very least, for an American reader. Allow me to expand a bit more on this before going back to this tweet, and why it remains relevant to us today.

The Duplessis to whom he is referring is, of course, Maurice Duplessis, Premier of Quebec from 1936 to 1939, and again from 1944 until his death in 1959. Founder of the Union nationale party, he is to this date the longest-serving Premier in the history of Quebec. As such, one could expect Duplessis to hold a special place in Quebec's history and in the collective imagination of Quebecers. He does, though he is not necessarily remembered by many in a good light. Far from it.

In Quebec's collective memory, Maurice Duplessis is associated with the Great Darkness, which, as the name indicates, has quite a pejorative meaning and significance. Recalling the Dark Ages, which inspired the term, the Great Darkness is seen as a moment frozen in time, where progress was put to a halt by the power of the Catholic Church, omniscient and working hand-in-hand with the provincial state, with its anti-union, anti-urban, anti-progressive policies. It was symbolized by Duplessis' persona, whom historians have castigated as a paternalist (and sometimes corrupt) autocrat.

His death in 1959 was the first blow to the Great Darkness; the second was the victory of his rival, Jean Lesage, leader of the Quebec Liberal Party, whose slogan claimed loudly that it was "time for a change." His victory on June 22, 1960, paved the way for a new era in Quebec politics, marked notably by secularization and the modernization of the state. This period is known as the Quiet Revolution, another one of contemporary Quebec's great myths,



Maurice Duplessis, Premier of Quebec, 1936-39; 1944-59 (Courtesy of Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec and Gaby archives photographiques).

which, alongside the Great Darkness, articulates a dichotomic conception of Quebec's past, where the year 1960 appears as a fracture between two distinct time periods encompassing two distinct worlds.

The symbolism remains potent. Invoking the name of Maurice Duplessis, even though it is more than 50 years after his death, is far from

insignificant or meaningless; it is tantamount to evoking the Great Darkness. On the other end of the spectrum, to reference Jean Lesage's name is to conjure up the sense of liberation and modernization that Quebecers historically attach to the 1960s and the onset of the Quiet Revolution. I have studied the history of the Great

Darkness and I am fascinated by the way that this term is wielded so easily and with such political force. It is not trivial for the co-spokesperson of CLASSE to have referenced the name of Maurice Duplessis at the peak of the Maple Spring. It shows quite clearly that the Great Darkness is still “trending” in twenty-first-century Quebec.

was far from being the only one to connect the Great Darkness to his own era and the Maple Spring. The Great Darkness was repeatedly referenced, especially on Twitter, and so, too, was the Quiet Revolution. Many, both on and off social media, were drawing parallels between the Great Darkness and the then-current political situation in Quebec, and with the Quiet Revolution. And they used

By working on this corpus, and others to come, I intend to better answer the two questions that have fascinated me ever since: In the age of social media and new technologies, how do people use references to the past so that they may be able to make sense of their present and future society? What impacts do social media and new technologies have on people’s understanding of the past, present and future? After I wrapped up my doctoral thesis, this eventually became the subject of a Quebec Government-funded Postdoctoral Fellowship in Digital History at the University of Ottawa, which I held from 2015 to 2017.

Since then, I have kept working on the links between history, memory, and social media, beyond the events of the Maple Spring and the frontiers of Quebec. This research led me to become the Killam Visiting Professor in Canadian Studies at Bridgewater State in Fall 2017 and, currently, the Fulbright Distinguished Chair in Quebec Studies at SUNY Plattsburgh, where I am conducting a comparative study between Quebec and the United States on these issues.

And all of that came from just a tweet...

In the age of social media and new technologies, how do people use references to the past so that they may be able to make sense of their present and future society? What impacts do social media and new technologies have on people’s understanding of the past, present and future?

This revelation came to me quite by accident. When I read Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois’ tweet, I was amused, but did not think too much of it. I thought it might make a good epigraph, something I could use to begin a scholarly essay. But then I decided to retweet his post on my personal account (@alexturngeon). And that developed into something wholly unexpected.

In the hours that followed, my retweet entered me into a much broader discussion (in 140-character bites), about the resonance between Quebec’s past and its present. Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois

them to project what was to come—or rather what they wished to come—in 2012 Quebec.

In light of all of this activity and effervescence, I decided to keep retweeting those posts on my personal account. In doing so, I discovered how popular and useful these references were for those commenting on and debating the Maple Spring. Hours became days. Days became weeks. Weeks became months. From May 16 to September 12, 2012, I collected all of the tweets from this phenomenon, one I have since coined “Great Darkness and Quiet Revolution 2.0”: about 6,000 tweets in all, not including retweets.



Alexandre Turgeon was Killam Visiting Professor of Canadian Studies in Fall 2017.